

Exploring the usefulness of Social Media in the Internationalisation Process of SMEs*

*Explorando la utilidad de las redes sociales en el proceso de
internacionalización de Pymes*

*Exploration de l'utilité des médias sociaux dans le processus
d'internationalisation des PME*

Mónica Marcela Tapias Restrepo**
monitapias@hotmail.com

**Ingeniería Administrativa, Escuela de Ingeniería de Antioquia,
MSc Strategic Marketing, University of Glasgow,
Glasgow-Escocia

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Resumen

La internacionalización de las Pymes ha sido ampliamente estudiada. Estas empresas son fundamentales para la economía, y gracias a nuevas tecnologías, han podido superar barreras en la internacionalización. Así, a pesar de sus limitados recursos y capacidades administrativas, ahora son importantes jugadoras dentro del comercio internacional. Por otro lado, el fenómeno de las redes sociales ha sido analizado desde la perspectiva del mercadeo, pero no desde la internacionalización; entonces, un estudio cualitativo basado en entrevistas a Pymes colombianas fue realizado, con el objetivo de explorar la utilidad de las redes sociales en el proceso de internacionalización de las Pymes desde la perspectiva del conocimiento y del networking. Fue posible tener un acercamiento para conocer la utilidad de estas redes en la difusión de información de la empresa y en la adquisición de información sobre consumidores y competidores; información que lleva a identificar y generar oportunidades en nuevos mercados. Además se encontró que las Pymes pueden aprovechar los comentarios de los consumidores y realizar otras estrategias de comunicación como compartir contenido, para construir credibilidad ante clientes potenciales, y para profundizar la intimidad en las relaciones con sus contactos. En consecuencia, las Pymes e instituciones gubernamentales relacionadas, deben ser conscientes del potencial que tienen las redes sociales e incluirlas en sus agendas.

Palabras clave: Redes sociales, internacionalización, PYMES, *networking*, mercadeo.

Abstract

SMEs internationalisation has been widely studied because these companies, which are very important for the economy, are now big players in international markets despite their lack of financial resources and managerial capabilities; they have been able to overcome some barriers due to new technologies. Social media are a new phenomenon which has been studied from a marketing perspective but not from an internationalisation perspective. Hence, a qualitative research consisting of interviews to Colombian SMEs in order to explore the usefulness of social media in the internationalisation process of SMEs was conducted, from the knowledge and networking perspective. Then, it was possible to get a first approach to the usefulness of social networks in processes regarding information dissemination and information acquisition about consumers and competitors, which leads to identify and generate opportunities in new markets. It was also possible to identify how SMEs take advantage of consumer's reviews, content sharing and other communication strategies in order to build credibility before potential clients and to increase intimacy within their networks. Consequently, SMEs and policy makers should be aware of the potential social media have and then include it in their agendas.

Keywords: Social media, internationalization, SMEs, networking, marketing.

Résumé

L'internationalisation des PME a été largement étudiée parce que ces entreprises, qui sont très importants pour l'économie, sont maintenant de grands joueurs sur les marchés internationaux ; malgré leur manque de ressources financières et capacités de gestion, ils ont été capables de

surmonter certains obstacles grâce aux nouvelles technologies. Les médias sociaux sont un phénomène nouveau qui a été étudié dès point de vue du marketing, mais pas du point de vue de l'internationalisation. Ainsi, une recherche qualitative comprenant des entrevues aux PME colombiennes afin d'explorer l'utilité des médias sociaux dans le processus d'internationalisation des PME a été menée, à partir de la perspective des réseaux et des connaissances. Alors, on a obtenu une première approche de l'utilité des réseaux sociaux dans les processus en matière de diffusion de l'information et de l'acquisition de l'information sur les consommateurs et les concurrents. Cette approche conduit à identifier et générer des opportunités dans de nouveaux marchés. On a également identifié comme les PME se sont bénéficiés des avis des consommateurs, le partage de contenu et d'autres stratégies de communication afin de renforcer la crédibilité face aux clients potentiels et d'augmenter l'intimité au sein de leurs réseaux. Par conséquent, les PME et les décideurs doivent être conscients du potentiel des médias sociaux et bien de les inclure dans leurs programmes.

Mots-clés: Réseaux sociaux, internationalisation, PME, networking, marketing.

Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are important for the economy growth and development, often they account for more than 90% and contribute with around 50% of employment. For instance, in Colombia, they account for 96.4% of total enterprises, contribute with around 70% of employment (Cantillo, 2011), and constitute 50% of exporting enterprises (Montoya, Montoya & Castellanos, 2010). With globalization, these companies have been forced to expand and go overseas and now are considered important players in international markets (Chiao, Yang & Yu 2006; Hassouneh & Brengman, 2011).

In recent years, some researchers have been interested in internationalisation, especially in the case of SMEs, since the phenomena of the “born global” emerged; these companies are defined as small technology-oriented firms which have been operating in international markets from their creation (McDougall, Scott & Oviatt., 1994). In consequence, internationalisation theories have been called into question and some studies have tried to explain and model the SMEs internationalisation process (Andersen, 1993).

Additionally, the Internet has revolutionized not only human behaviour but also the business world (Bell & Loane, 2010). Nowadays, the new generation of the Internet, “web 2.0,” has taken these changes even farther bringing new social and technological trends that affect relationship patterns and the flow of information (Bell & Loane, 2010). Some studies have demonstrated the effect of the Internet on internationalisation and have concluded that one of Internet roles has been to lessen internationalisation barriers and speed up such a process. Also, in the case of web 2.0, studies have shown its effectiveness as a marketing tool or even as a managerial tool (Bell & Loane, 2010; Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010; Awan, 2010; Tseng & Johnsen, 2011; Razmerita & Kirchner, 2011).

So far, in the business field, there are many studies that have been focused on the role of the Internet in internationalisation or Web 2.0 as a marketing tool (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010;

Carter, 2011). However, only few studies have explored the usefulness of Web 2.0 in the internationalisation process, more specifically Social Media. Some authors have discussed how virtual worlds like Second Life can support companies when gathering information about consumers and markets, and also the possibility for being used in product testing (Hassouneh & Brengman, 2011; Lim & Melewar, 2011). Consequently, this research project explores the usefulness and benefits of social media like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter in the internationalisation process of Colombian SMEs.

Taking into account that social media are considered a low-cost information technology, it is important for SMEs to know, understand how, and have access to social media tools that lessen internationalisation barriers (Awan, 2010; Loane, 2006) related to financial resources and managerial capabilities (Hollenstein, 2005), facilitating their expansion and supporting their international strategies.

In order to understand the usefulness of social media in internationalisation, the knowledge approach of internationalisation combined with the networking nature of social media suggests its utility; these concepts of knowledge and networking are considered fundamental in internationalisation by theories like the stage theory (Andersen, 1993; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), the knowledge base theory, and the network approach (Coviello & McAuley, 1999).

Accordingly, based on what Prashantham (2008) proposes about the role of the Internet from a knowledge-based view, it is required to explore how SMEs in Colombia are using social media to disseminate, acquire, and share information in areas such as marketing and product development; or in general, to increase their market, technological, and internationalisation knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Likewise, it is important to assess if SMEs consider social media an effective tool for these purposes (Awan, 2010).

In the case of the network perspective, it is necessary to explore how SMEs in Colombia are using social media to develop new relationships with suppliers, costumers, agents, and other actors involved in the internationalisation process (Coviello, 2006). It is also important to evaluate if social media supports SMEs to build credibility and to enhance intimacy through communications.

Finally, the structure of this document is as follows: the research methodology, where the main concepts, the type, the sample, and the instrument are explained. Afterwards, all findings and results followed by the conclusions; implications for managers and policy makers; and limitations.

1. Methodology

The theoretical framework was design from the concepts of knowledge and networks, which are related with theories that aim to explain the internationalization of SMEs. Similarly, According to Prashantham (2008), the Internet has speeded up the process since is considered as an intensive information resource, that can be used by firms to disseminate, acquire, and share information; and it enables interactivity and enhances the creation of networks.

First, it is important to differentiate three types of knowledge involved in internationalisation: there is a *technological* knowledge, that is firm specific and leads to establish a competitive advantage or to adapt to new environments; also, there is an *internationalization* knowledge that is firm specific and is related to the capability to determine international strategies and to operate in international market; and finally, the *market* knowledge, which is market specific and is associated with local conditions, institutions (governments, laws, etc.), and other business players (competitors, customers, suppliers, etc.) (Fletcher & Harris, 2012).

Therefore, according to the role of the internet suggested by Prashantham (2008) and the differentiation of sources and types of knowledge made by Fletcher and Harris (2012):

Research Question 1: Are social media being used by SMEs to disseminate, acquire, and share information that leads to increase

- a. market,
- b. technological
- c. and internationalization knowledge?

Second, the “born global” phenomenon has questioned the majority of the internationalisation models (Hollenstein, 2005; McDougall, et al., 1994) because some of the SMEs characteristics such as the size and their lack of managerial and financial resources are considered constraints in the process. In order to explain this, the most common model used is the network approach, which demonstrates the potential usefulness of networks in the SMEs internationalisation (Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Torkkeli, Puumalainen, Saarenketo & Kuivalainen, 2012).

It considers networks as an important source of resources that allows firms to reach levels of internationalization and performance which would not be able to be achieved by their own (Prashantham, 2008; Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Torkkeli, et al., 2012). In order to understand this, it is important to refer to Social Capital which is defined as “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through and derived from the network relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243).

In the development of social capital, it is essential for SMEs to reach visibility, efficiency, and intimacy in order to have access to opportunities despite the size, the lack of experience, and the fact that they come from a foreign country. Furthermore, *visibility* is associated with credibility and the opportunity to interact with other agents; *efficiency* is related directly to control and bargaining power, which is built over time through a firm performance in its interactions (meeting deadlines, cost-cutting); and *intimacy*, which is related to the coherence of the international strategy that is achieved when needs and strategies of a firm’s partners are understood (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Prashantham, 2008; Zain & Imm Ng, 2006).

Consequently, taking into account the concepts mentioned by Prashantham (2008), the findings of Coviello & Munro (1995) and the theory of Social Capital developed by Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998:

Research Question 2: Are social media being used by SMEs to develop networks and to get visibility, efficiency, and intimacy within them?

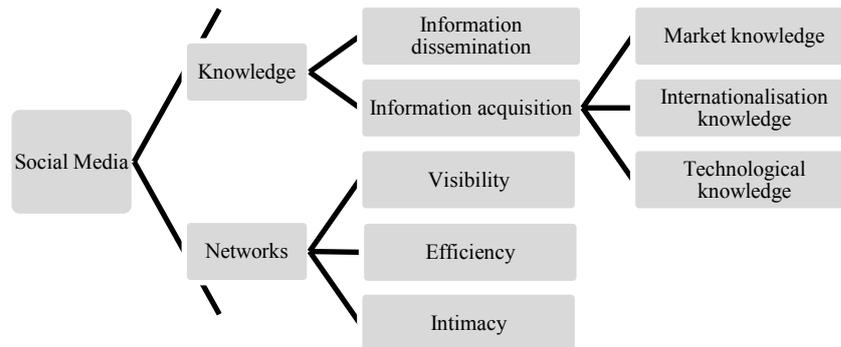
In order to answer these research questions, the most accurate and proper research method is the *qualitative research*, first because it is an exploratory study and there are only few studies focused on this field (Hakim, 2000); second, the study aims to answer questions that describe how SMEs are currently making use of social media, what processes of marketing, communication, among others are associated, and the description of these processes; third, it intends to get an understanding of possible links between internationalisation and social media (Marshall & Rossman, 1999); and finally, information comes from personal experience, attitudes, and interpretation of individuals within organisations regarding the subject, and this information is mainly composed by words which constitute concepts (Seidman, 1997).

Only few studies have been focused on the usefulness of social media in the internationalisation of SMEs. In order to design the theoretical framework, it was necessary to follow a deductive process from internationalisation theories based on knowledge and networks. Afterwards, once the data was collected and analysed, it followed an inductive process, which results from the observation of specific patterns to come up with generalisations, hypothesis, and theories (Bryman & Belle, 2007).

In addition to this, the type of qualitative research selected was *in-depth interviews*, because it is a flexible instrument that allows researchers to go deep in certain topics, and to customize it regarding time and content according to the research purposes; also, this methodology is appropriate when interviewees are high status employees or business people that are difficult to recruit (Lee & Lings, 2008).

Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was conducted since there was a theoretical framework (Lee & Lings, 2008), in order to address questions and analyse information (See Graphic 1). Besides, the structure of the instrument for collecting data was composed of attributes about the company, its internationalisation process and its social media strategies, and also of behaviours and attitudes related to the main concepts treated in the theoretical framework.

Graphic 1. Theoretical framework



Source: Prepared by the author.

The length of each interview was approximately 90 minutes, that according to Seidman (1997), it is a good time for managing a proper interview. Because of the distance and constraints regarding resources and time, the interviews were done through Skype; they were recorded and then transcribed.

The sampling units consist of small and medium companies in Colombia; and it was expected that the owner, the general manager or an employee directly involved in internationalisation respond the interview. Additionally, the sample size was six companies that were operating in foreign markets and have experience using social media.

After transcribing the interviews, the information was reduced and coded based the concepts of the theoretical framework; in fact, this process of coding was important to compare and draw conclusions for the research questions. Finally, information was displayed in order to describe and explain the process and links between internationalisation and social media.

2. Findings

2.1 Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the coding process was based on the theoretical framework explained above; ideas and concepts were classified according to it. In some cases it was necessary to expand each concept in order to facilitate the analysis; also, other ideas that were not directly related to the theoretical framework required a new classification.

This classification included attributes of the companies (size, sector, markets, and time in the market) and the interviewees (name, time in the company, and function); furthermore, it included information related to internationalisation (reasons to internationalise, barriers, internationalisation strategy, and decisions such as the mode of entry) and information about social media (general opinions and strategies followed).

Data collection followed an inductive process where companies were asked about strategies and situations regarding the concepts evaluated and then about the relationship of social media to each of them (see Graphic 1). Therefore, findings are displayed following the same logic.

2.2 Company's profiles

Companies are all located in Colombia; one of them is a microenterprise, three are small and two are medium. Five of them are manufacturers, two from the textile industry, one from the leather industry, and one from the food industry; the sixth one is a kitchenware retailer. The interviewees were in two cases the owner and the general manager; in other cases, employees from sales departments, international commerce, and communications.

Regarding internationalisation, it was found that currently two of the companies are exporting to five countries, other two to three countries and only one to one country. Four of the companies proactively sought for internationalisation and even two of them were conceived for international markets. Although for most companies the importance of their networks was evident, in five cases clients, friends, family members or other personal contacts played an important role identifying the opportunity of going abroad or giving them support in the process in these international markets.

In addition to this, the entry mode was, for most companies, direct exports to salespersons and distributors; but in the case of the retailer, the entry mode was franchising.

2.3 Knowledge

As mentioned above in the methodology section, the knowledge concept is analysed taking into account activities related to information dissemination and information acquisition about market, technologies, and internationalisation matters. The participants were asked about the different strategies they followed and sources of that information.

Information dissemination

The six companies coincided with the participation in either national or international fairs to contact clients and to promote and position their products in those markets; these fairs are sometimes sponsored by governmental institutions in Colombia, like Chambers of Commerce and PROEXPORT, an institution that promotes export of Colombian products. The companies remarked the importance of these organizations supporting the process, which sometimes includes financial aid; also, some companies have received this support from international institutions or personal contacts that represent them in these international fairs.

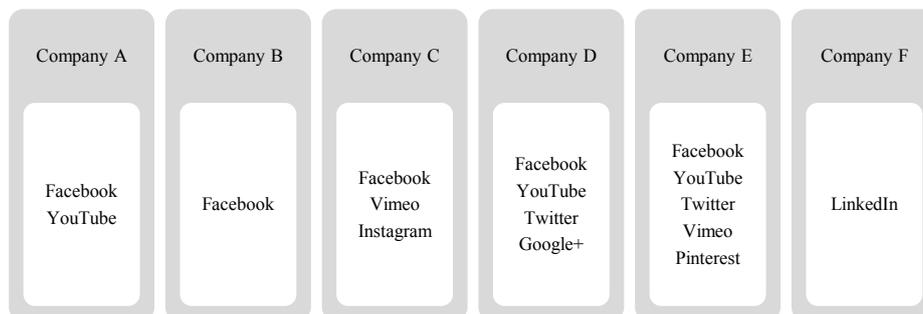
Likewise, business rounds and trade missions are commonly used by the majority of the Colombian SMEs to present their companies; in the case of the fairs, PROEXPORT leads both activities, either inviting international clients or setting an agenda in foreign countries and covering some expenses related.

Other less mentioned strategies include: brick and mortar stores —either in Colombia or in foreign countries— that have carried out the task of positioning the brand within their consumers or bringing potential clients; in addition, competitors also have helped promoting the product category.

Regarding the Internet, all of the companies have websites in which information about the company and its products is published, and in some cases this information is available in english and spanish to target international clients. The strategy followed is different for every company; while some companies use it just to support communications, others use it for generating content of consumer's interests and lifestyles; in addition to this, some of consumers have been advised, by governmental institutions, in topics related to both the webpage and strategies.

Concerning social media, it is important to mention some findings about the use of these social networks: the most frequently used are Facebook and YouTube, followed by Twitter and Vimeo; others are Pinterest, Instagram, and Google+ (See Graphic 2). All the companies have at least one account in social media; although, not all of them include it in their marketing strategies; for instance, there were two companies that rely more on other activities for disseminating information and promoting their companies and they only have a Facebook group or a LinkedIn account to be present in the world of social media.

Graphic 2. Presence in social media



Source: Prepared by the author.

Differently, four companies intensively use social media and include or even completely rely on them for marketing purposes; they have between two and six social network accounts. The strategy followed by these companies is similar in the sense that they are focused on creating content of interest related to consumer's lifestyles in order to increase engagement and interactivity with final consumers. In this process, it is possible to leverage the effectiveness of marketing strategies through the content sharing; thus, the company can disseminate information through other's websites, blogs, and social media and reach bigger audiences in international markets. In the case of two companies, this co-branding strategy is frequently used.

There were other opinions and experiences related to social media functions in internationalisation; for instance, they are considered effective means to contact salespersons in foreign markets since potential clients have contacted the company through them; furthermore, they can be used to support marketing strategies of international partners like franchisees; finally, they also hold and display information concerning consumer's opinions about the brand, so international clients can access those reviews to get an image and better understanding about the company for future negotiations.

Graphic 3. Use of social media for information dissemination



Source: Prepared by the author.

Information acquisition

Governmental institutions like the Chambers of Commerce and PROEXPORT possess valuable information about the markets and the conditions in foreign countries, and most companies have turned to them to consult specific data. Also, it was found that these institutions lead projects or help companies in the process of evaluating potential markets; for instance, three of the companies hold complete market studies and also actively conduct research, unlike other three companies which rely more on their own experience or their personal.

Similarly, the Internet is considered as another valuable source to get information related to countries and markets such as demographic data, conditions, competitors, and trends; in this process, companies use search engines like Google. Other less cited ways to acquire information about markets and consumers were direct visit in the destination country, business rounds or through their own brick and mortar stores.

Additionally, in order to get information about markets, most companies agree to consult their distributors, clients or franchisees, who share their personal experience and knowledge. The companies also consult consumer's feedbacks to get a better understanding of their needs and preferences.

Accordingly, social media enable this communication with clients, and because they are two way channels, it is possible to immediately and directly get consumer's feedbacks and opinions. Besides, companies can get information about consumer's interest through their boards and profiles in social networks, and information about consumers behaviours through Facebook statistics and other web analysers.

As two companies revealed, these statistics are useful to identify and have access to opportunities; for instance, when a significant number of consumers from a certain region access, share or "like" a product-related content, it could be a sign of an opportunity in a new market; as the company E stated: "we take it as a giant focus group; we are continually getting information from them, some «likes» can be translated into a positive or negative acceptance of our products"; and the Company D cited: "if we notice an increase in a specific region, we try to find out, what is happening there, why do we have that boom of visits?".

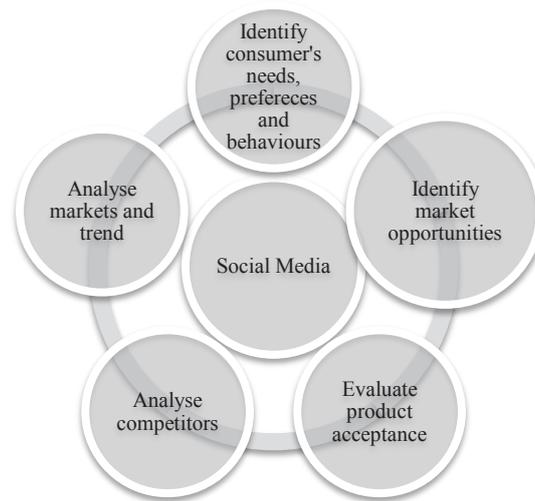
Otherwise, they are identified through personal contacts, competitors or governmental institutions.

In addition to this, the information sourced in social media can also be used by companies to identify consumer's needs and preferences, and new market trends; as Company D shared: "we try to find out everything on the Internet. Through Twitter, let say, it easily provides information about trends". Also, it can be used for geographic segmentation of consumers, to analyse product acceptance, and to investigate competitors; in fact, this was one of the most common ways among the companies to analyse competitor's marketing strategies, brand image, and their offerings; as Company A stated: "for competitors? Totally, I mean, obviously Facebook is a tool for competitor analysis". Graphic 4 summarizes all the different uses of social media in the process of information acquisition.

Regarding internationalisation information, all the companies have acquired it through governmental institutions like PROEXPORT, that provides training on the field. Also, some companies have nurtured their bases with their previous experience, their employees or on the go; or turning to third parties like clients and companies specialized in international trade.

Finally, some companies visit specialized fairs, search on the Internet or rely on their employees to find out new technologies that can be implemented for product development.

Graphic 4. Uses of information sourced by social media



Source: Prepared by the author.

2.4 Networks

Development

Most companies have widened their networks and have contacted new clients through the activities supported by governmental institutions, which include participation in international and national fairs, business rounds, and trade missions. In this process, these institutions create opportunities for Colombian SMEs to show themselves and bring them together with potential international clients; even more, they search or receive potential clients and then refer them to the companies. In addition to this, other agents which are sources of new contacts include competitors, companies of the sector, and other previous personal contacts.

Concerning social media, four of the companies mentioned being contacted by potential clients or distributors through this channel; for instance, one of the companies has expanded its sales force due to social media. However, these contacts are not very frequent or effective, and in one case it resulted in a negative experience. Therefore, besides the activities mentioned above, clients normally contact the company through email, the web site or phone calls.

Functions

In general, it was found that networks benefit companies from different perspectives; one of the most frequently mentioned is the source of information, as explained in the previous section, companies acquire information related to market, technologies, and internationalisation from their networks. In this last aspect, governmental institutions and personal contacts are the most consulted ones.

These networks are also important to identify and generate opportunities in foreign markets: recognising opportunities, referring potential clients or creating spaces for SMEs where they can present their companies. Regarding this, the most important contacts again are government institutions and personal contacts. Indeed, four of the companies started internationalisation because of their friends and families in foreign markets.

(i) Visibility

The six companies mentioned that networks bring benefits related to visibility and credibility enhancement. Four of them agree with the role of governmental institutions inviting the companies to participate in different activities; equally, being introduced and supported by these institutions increase credibility before potential clients. Also, companies make use of their distributors, clients, and suppliers.

In addition to this, some of the contacts are involved in strategies to disseminate information about the company such as distributors and companies of the sector, as mentioned in previous section. Regarding the Internet strategies, two of the companies have made use of online retailers to offer their products.

Related to social media, three of the companies have used co-branding or similar strategies when creating or sharing content; they either take content from other companies where the brand is present or create content involving other brands. With these strategies, companies take advantage of other's image to increase credibility and also of other's networks to increase the opportunity to interact with other agents.

Furthermore, one of these companies—which intensively generates content of interest for their target market—has an alliance with another company to produce and share it through their websites and social media; also, it has been contacted by people overseas interested in using that material in their websites and blogs. Similarly, other company uses other's Facebook fan pages to promote their products.

Along with this, consumer's reviews in social media can be considered by potential clients as a source of information about the company and its products, and this is useful to build credibility. Company D stated: "from this point of view, it may be a strength, it is like a support to increase credibility before customers, either distributors or final consumers".

(ii) Efficiency

It was found that some of these networks bring benefits related to efficiency, which entails time and cost reduction in certain operations. Four of the companies have actively made partnerships or alliances or have participated in programs led by governmental institutions and international organizations; these alliances and programs include, for example, multi-brand stores, corporate networks, clusters and projects to evaluate potential markets.

Concerning cost-cutting, four companies revealed that their relationship with governmental institutions, besides the implicit cost reduction derived from their programs, has also allowed them to have access to financial aid that covers expenses related to visits and participation in

fairs abroad. Additionally, the Internet tools have decreased communication costs and those related to carrying out market and technological research.

In the case of social media, their role is not very clear; however, three companies mentioned that they have brought cost-cutting in advertising and competitor analysis.

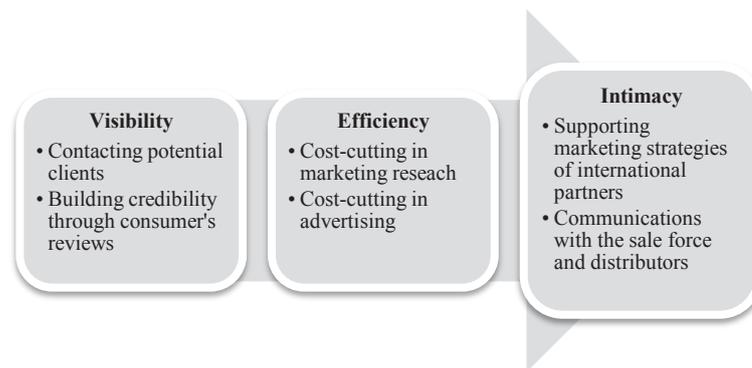
Enhancing intimacy

All the companies coincided with the main strategy to increase intimacy within networks, which lies in permanent communication with their contacts. In the case of international clients, besides communication, it is also important to monitor their progress and receive feedback. In addition, the most common ways to communicate with them are via email and Skype, followed by phone calls and personal meetings.

Social media are not commonly used for communication with international partners; nevertheless, three companies have social media strategies that entail the development of intimacy with international partners: communicating marketing strategies to the sale force; supporting marketing strategies of international partners through the company's fan page; and producing and sharing content that involves their distributors.

Graphic 5 summarizes all findings regarding the role of social media in internationalization from the network perspective:

Graphic 5. Role of social media in networking



Source: Prepared by the author.

3. Discussion

It was found that networks are very important for internationalisation of Colombian SMEs; this is in agreement with the network perspective theories of internationalisation proposed by Coviello (2006), Coviello & McAuley (1999), and Coviello & Munro (1995). Also, the benefits that networks provide to SMEs related to generation, identification of opportunities and driving internalisation were evident (Zain & Imm Ng, 2006), since most of the companies internationalised due to personal contacts. Coviello & Munro (1995), likewise, the governmental institutions have

executed an important function in this process, as Senik, Scott, Entrekin and Adham (2011) mentions in their study.

Additionally, it could be noticed that these networks enhance knowledge acquisition, as Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) explain in the social capital theory. In the case of market and internationalisation knowledge, the most common source consulted by companies is governmental institutions, companies directly search on the web or attend specialized fairs to get technological knowledge, all of this is in accordance with the work of Fletcher and Harris (2012).

Regarding the Internet, it has played an important role in the internationalisation process of SMEs; first, SMEs use Internet tools to support their marketing strategies, or as Prashantham (2008) suggests, to disseminate information; second, it enables communication with international clients, as the studies of Awan (2010), Loane (2006), and Tseng and Johnsen (2011) propose; finally, the companies turn to the Internet to get information about markets and technologies as Tseng and Johnsen (2011) and Prashantham (2008) explain.

Furthermore, Bell and Loane (2010) propose in their study the benefits that web 2.0 tools bring for companies concerning information flow and content sharing; this became evident when Colombian SMEs get information about consumer's preferences and behaviours through their reviews and feedbacks. Also, companies revealed different marketing strategies they followed in social media in order to disseminate information and reach bigger audiences, which is in agreement with the papers of Aschaiek (2011) and Mannonen and Runonen (2008); additionally, as Michaelidou et al., (2011) explain, it is a way to attract new clients.

It was also found that Twitter was not very used by companies as a marketing tool; hence, its usefulness for SMEs is still questioned (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010). Apart from social media, other web 2.0 tools were not cited; for instance, unlike Hassouneh and Brengman's (2011) proposition, any of the companies uses virtual worlds to get information about markets or to test products; likewise, they do not make use of wikis in management operations, and this goes against suggestions of Razmerita and Kirchner (2011).

Conclusions

This study explored the usefulness of social media in the internationalisation process of SMEs in Colombia; its aim was to give a first approach in the usefulness of social media in this process, in order to do so, the evaluation of two concepts that are involved in internationalisation theories were required: knowledge and networking, which were used to design the theoretical framework that was the basis of the research project. Therefore, two research questions emerged:

RQ1: Are social media being used by SMEs to disseminate, acquire, and share information that leads to increase

- Market
- Technological
- Internationalization knowledge?

RQ2: Are social media being used by SMEs to develop networks and to get visibility, efficiency, and intimacy within them?

For that reason, a qualitative research that consists of in depth interviews with owners, general managers or employees from marketing or internationalisation departments of Colombian SMEs was conducted. Although it is important to take into account that some limitations arise related to the research sample, only six companies were interviewed, the majority of which were manufacturers from the clothing industry; however, contacting the owner in all the occasions, as expected, was not possible.

Regarding the Research Question 1, it was found that social media are being used by Colombian SMEs in marketing activities to disseminate information about the company and its products, and to attract potential international clients. In this process, content generation is critical because it is an effective mean to increase consumer's engagement through their lifestyles and interests. Also, this content generation is important to involve other companies or international partners: to reach bigger audiences through other's networks, enhance their image through cobranding strategies or to support marketing strategies of international partners, which leads to strengthen the relationship.

Accordingly with this process of information dissemination, since social media allowed content co-creation, it was found that it is possible to leverage credibility before potential clients through consumer reviews because these clients have access to different sources to create an image of the company.

Similarly, companies can get information about market trends, competitors, and consumer's needs and preferences; also, studying consumer's online behaviour and getting demographic data is possible through Facebook statistics and other web analysers, and this can be used by companies to identify market opportunities, to evaluate new products and for segmentation purposes.

Finally, regarding internationalisation and technological knowledge, social media are not commonly used as a source of this information.

In the case of Research Question 2, social media, because of their nature, have performed the function of broadening networks and attract new clients. Also, they have allowed SMEs disseminate information and reach bigger audiences using networks of other companies; for example, in the case of co-branding and content sharing. In addition, companies can increase their visibility using those co-branding strategies and taking advantage of consumer's reviews.

The role of social media in reaching efficiency within networks is not very clear; however, there are other activities where social media bring cost-cutting, such as advertising and marketing research.

Finally, in order to achieve intimacy, social media can support communication with distributors in foreign markets and help companies when assisting international partners in marketing strategies, although there are other means preferred.

Table 1. Social media and the internationalisation process of Colombian SMEs

Social Media and internationalisation			
Knowledge		Networking	
Information dissemination	Information acquisition	Visibility	Intimacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To reach bigger audiences ▪ To display consumer's reviews to increase credibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get information of consumer's needs and preferences ▪ To Analyse competitors ▪ To analyse markets and trends ▪ To identify market opportunities ▪ To evaluate product acceptance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To attract new clients ▪ To increase credibility through consumer's reviews and other companies (co-branding) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To support partner's marketing strategies ▪ To communicate with international partners

Source: Prepared by the author.

Implications

For managers

Social media are a new phenomenon, it has permeated the business world and has changed the way consumers related to companies, in the sense that communications are no longer one way (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Bell & Loane, 2010). These changes have not only challenged marketers but have also brought new opportunities and benefits, especially for SMEs. In the case of marketing, SMEs now are able to spread the word easier and reach bigger audiences, including international ones (Aschaiek, 2011; Carter, 2011). Also, it brings information related to consumers and markets which can be used to generate and identify opportunities. Moreover, the costs involved are low when compared to traditional methods, so it is easy to overcome barriers associated with international marketing and marketing research.

Companies sometimes overestimate social media and base their strategy in “being present”; this strategy is not enough and leads to a waste of opportunities. Accordingly, it was found that some companies' growth is due to social media; and others have found in their statistics an interesting source of information that can be used for identifying opportunities in new markets, analysing product acceptance or for segmentation purposes.

Even more, being just present can go against or diminish the results of other marketing strategies; if the presence in social media is weak this can affect and influence the corporate and brand image, since nowadays more people consult the internet, including social media. On the contrary, if social media strategy is well grounded, the company can even leverage its corporate and brand image through co-branding strategies and consumer's reviews, which can support potential clients in decision making and further negotiations.

In conclusion, companies should include social media as a source in their marketing research activities and for decision making purposes; also, they should design strong strategies that go in

accordance with their general marketing aims, so they can leverage and take advantage of their benefits.

For policy makers

SMEs deal with constraints regarding financial resources and managerial capabilities, which lead them to face internationalisation barriers. Therefore, it is important for SMEs to find and have access to different tools that help them overcome those barriers and support the internationalisation process. It was found that governmental institutions played an important role in the internationalisation of Colombian SMEs; they take advantage of the institution's activities as they allow them to promote their companies and to contact potential clients; besides, they consult these institutions as a source of information to evaluate and identify potential markets. In the last process, governmental agencies provide training in internationalisation matters.

Bearing in mind all above mentioned, governmental agencies like PROEXPORT and Chambers of Commerce should include in their portfolio training in social media strategies and their management, allowing companies to increase their knowledge and develop new skills; therefore, they will have access to and would take advantage of the opportunities and benefits that social media bring for marketing and communication, in addition to the low cost of investment required to execute those strategies.

Limitations

Although the interviews brought relevant information, the sample size (six companies) was not enough to reach the theoretical saturation, affecting the research validity and reliability. As explained in the methodology section, it was not possible to increase the number of companies because of the time constraint to carry out the research project. In addition to this, it was also suggested to include companies from a variety of sectors but it was not possible in the recruitment process; therefore, most of them were manufacturers from the clothing industry; results and findings are then biased.

Similarly, it was very important to contact the owner or the general manager of the company because they were considered important sources, since they had significant information related to the main concepts evaluated in the study; in some cases, it was not possible to contact the owners of the company, consequently some employees from the internationalisation or marketing departments were contacted; as a consequence, some concepts could not be deeply treated.

Further research

This study offers an exploratory research about the usefulness of social media in the internationalisation of Colombian SMEs. However, because the sample size was narrow, it was not possible to establish differences among companies from different sectors regarding the use of these social networks.

In addition to this, further research includes the assessment of social media effectiveness in all the areas mentioned; first, a comparative analysis between companies that use social media

and those which do not use them, regarding the activities they use to identify opportunities, consumer's needs and preferences and to increase visibility within their networks can be addressed; this study could include financial information to give a more precise evaluation.

Similarly, it is necessary to deeply evaluate all the findings: that social media are considered as a source of information of market knowledge, so it is necessary to evaluate the trustworthiness of the information it holds and also manager's attitudes towards it; additionally, it is necessary to understand the research process followed by the companies and the way they adopt and assimilate the information to increase the company knowledge.

Finally, companies are implementing co-branding strategies through content share, which help them expand their networks and establish credibility; consequently, it is important to analyse the changes in the consumer's credibility perception when these strategies are followed, in order to evaluate the effectiveness for that purpose.

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